

Letter to J.N., Dated April 29, 2001

The text of the following extract has been altered only minimally, but the notes have been greatly expanded beyond those of the original.

You write, "Watching a documentary on a tribe of Amazon Indians, I found that their life was as ordered as any modern man's... their day seemed as regimented as an office worker's."

You reached this conclusion on the basis of one documentary that you watched. I would say you were a bit hasty. I can't comment on that particular tribe because I know nothing about it. You didn't even say what tribe it was.

I wouldn't necessarily say that the life of every primitive people is less regimented than ours is. Among the Aino (a sedentary hunting-and-gathering people who formerly occupied part of Japan), ritual obligations were so elaborate and pervasive that they imposed a heavy psychological burden, often leading to serious disorders.^[1]

But unquestionably many primitive societies were far less regimented than ours is. Regarding the African Pygmies, see Colin Turnbull's books on that subject,^[2] or Louis Sarno's *Song from the Forest*. One who lived among the North American Indians early in the 19th century wrote that they consisted of "individuals who had been educated to prefer almost any sacrifice to that of personal liberty.... The Indians individually acknowledge no superior, nor are they subordinate to any government.... [I]n general, the warriors while in their villages are unyielding, exceedingly tenacious of their freedom, and live together in a state of equality, closely approximated to natural rights... [A]lthough [their governments] somewhat resemble the democratic form, still a majority cannot bind a minority to a compliance with any acts of its own."^[3]

Of course, you have to understand that prior to the modern era freedom was not conceived, as it often is today, as the freedom to just fritter away one's time in aimless, hedonistic pursuits. It was taken for granted that survival required effort and self-discipline. But there is a world of difference between the discipline that a small band of people imposes on itself in order to meet practical necessities, and discipline that is imposed from the outside by large organizations.

You write, “High infant- and child-mortality must affect women in these cultures with a level of angst about their children and their own lives that we can’t imagine.”

This is a good point. The anarcho-primitivists find it convenient to overlook the high infant- and child-mortality rate (typically around 50%) of most preindustrial societies, including Western society up to the 18th century. The basic answer to this is simply that you can’t have it both ways: If you want to escape the evils of industrial society, then you have to pay a price for it. However, it’s likely that the high infant-mortality rate was necessary to preserve the health of the species. Today, weak and sickly babies survive to pass on their defective genes.

How do primitive women feel about it? I don’t know whether anyone has ever taken the trouble to ask them. It’s presumably very painful to them (and their husbands) when one of their babies dies. But I doubt that they feel the extreme anxiety that you suggest. A study of the Kalahari Bushmen found that they had very low levels of psychological stress,^[4] and I assume this included the women. When people see it as normal and expected that half their children should die during the first few years of life, they probably take it in stride and don’t worry about it unduly.^[5] The human race doubtless has had that high infant- and child-mortality rate for the last million years and is presumably adapted to it. For a woman to be tormented by constant anxiety about her children would be maladaptive, hence a tendency to such anxiety would probably be eliminated by natural selection.

Still, a 50% infant-mortality rate is no joke. It’s one of the hard aspects of forgoing industrial civilization.

You ask, “Is it not possible that our culture’s unhappiness stems from our lack of strong religious beliefs, not our industrial lifestyle?”

Undoubtedly *some* people are happier for having strong religious beliefs. On the other hand, I don’t think that strong religious belief is a prerequisite for happiness. Whether religion is *usually* conducive to happiness is open to argument.

But the point I want to make here is that the decline of religion in modern society is not an *accident*. It is a *necessary result* of technical progress. There are several reasons for this, of which I will mention three.

First, as page 42 of *Mean*,^[6] April 2001, puts it, “Every curtain science pulls away is another that God cannot hide behind.” In other words, as science advances, it disproves more and more traditional religious beliefs and therefore undermines faith.

Second, the need for toleration is antagonistic to strong religious belief. Various features of modern society, such as easy long-distance transportation, make mixing of populations inevitable. Today, people of different ethnic groups and different religions have to live and work side by side. In order to avoid the disruptive conflicts to which religious hatred would give rise, society has to teach us to be tolerant.

But toleration entails a weakening of religious faith. If you unquestioningly believed that your own creed was absolutely right, then you would also have to believe that every creed that disagreed with it was absolutely wrong, and this would imply a certain level of intolerance. In order to believe that all religions are just as good as yours is, you have to have, deep in your heart, considerable uncertainty about the truth of your own religion.

Third, all of the great world religions teach us such virtues as reverence and self-restraint. But the economists tell us that our economic health depends on a high level of consumption. To get us to consume, advertisers must offer us endless pleasure, they must encourage unbridled hedonism, and this undermines religious qualities like reverence and self-restraint.

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Regarding your question, there is so much to say in reply to it that I find it impossible to keep my answer brief. I’ll confine myself to three points of the many that could be made.

(a) It’s true that in many societies the extended family, the clan, or the village could be very confining. The paterfamilias (the “old man” who headed the extended family), or the council of village elders, kept people on a leash.

But when the paterfamilias and the village elders lost their grip on the leash as a result of modernization, it was picked up by “the system,” which now holds it much more tightly than the old-timers ever did.

The family or the village was small enough so that individuals within it were not powerless. Even where all authority was theoretically vested in the paterfamilias, in practice he could not retain his power unless he listened and responded to the grievances and problems of the individual members of his family.^[7]

Today, however, we are at the mercy of organizations, such as corporations, governments and political parties, that are too large to be responsive to single individuals. These organizations leave us a great deal of latitude where harmless recreational activities are concerned, but they keep under their own control the life-and-death issues on which our existence depends. With respect to these issues, individuals are powerless.

(b) In former times, for those who were willing to take serious risks, it was often possible to escape the bonds of the family, of the village, or of feudal structures. In medieval Western Europe, serfs ran away to become peddlers, robbers, or town-dwellers. Later, Russian peasants ran away to become Cossacks, black slaves ran away to live in the wilderness as “Maroons,” and indentured servants in the West Indies ran away to become buccaneers.^[8]

But in the modern world there is nowhere left to run. Wherever you go, you can be traced by your credit card, your social-security number, your fingerprints. You, Mr. N., live in California. Can you get a hotel or motel room there without showing your picture I.D.? You can’t survive unless you fit into a slot in the system, otherwise known as a “job.” And it is becoming increasingly difficult to get a job without making your whole past history accessible to prospective employers. So how can you defend your statement that “[m]odern urban society allows one to escape into an anonymity that family and clan based cultures couldn’t”?

Granted, there are still corners of the world where one can find wilderness, or governments so disorganized that one can escape from the system there. But these are relics of the past, and they will disappear as the system continues to grow.

(c) “Today,” you write, “one can...adopt whatever beliefs or lifestyle one wants. One can also easily travel, experiencing other cultures....”

But to what end? What, in practical terms, does one accomplish by changing one's beliefs or lifestyle, or by experiencing other cultures? Essentially nothing—except whatever fun one gets from it.

People don't need only fun, they need purposeful work, and they need to have control not only over the pleasure-oriented aspects of their lives but over the serious, practical, purposeful, life-and-death aspects. That kind of control is not possible in modern society because we are all at the mercy of large organizations.

Up to a point, having fun is good for you. But it's not an adequate substitute for serious, purposeful activity. For lack of this kind of activity people in our society get bored. They try to relieve their boredom by having fun. They seek new kicks, new thrills, new adventures. They masturbate their emotions by experimenting with new religions, new art-forms, travel, new cultures, new philosophies, new technologies. But still they are never satisfied, they always want more, because all of these activities are *purposeless*. People don't realize that what they really lack is serious, practical, purposeful work—work that is under their own control and is directed to the satisfaction of their own most essential, practical needs.

You ask, "How do we know that the breakdown of technological society won't lead to a simpler but more oppressive system?"

We don't know it. If the technological system should break down completely, then in areas unsuitable for agriculture—such as rugged mountains, arid plains, or the subarctic—people would probably be nomadic, supporting themselves as pastoralists or by hunting and gathering. Historically, nomadic peoples have tended to have a high degree of personal freedom.

But in areas suitable for large-scale, sedentary, intensive agriculture, people would probably support themselves by that kind of agriculture. And under those conditions it's likely that an oppressive landlord-class would tend to develop, like the feudal nobility of medieval Europe or the *latifundistas* of modern Latin America.

But even under the most oppressive conditions of the past, people were not as powerless as they are today. Russian serfs, for example, had means of resisting their landlords. They engaged in deception, theft, poaching, evasion of work, arson. If a peasant got angry enough, he would kill his landlord. If many peasants got angry at the same time, there would be a bloody revolt, a "jacquerie."^[9]

It's not a pretty picture. But it is at least arguable that Russian serfs had more freedom—the kind of freedom that really counts—than does the average well-trained, modern middle-class person, who has almost unlimited freedom in regard to recreational activities but is completely impotent vis-à-vis the large organizations that control the conditions under which he lives and the life-and-death issues on which his existence depends.

If the technoindustrial system collapses the probable result will be a reversion to a situation roughly equivalent to that which existed several hundred years ago, in the sense that people will live under widely varying conditions in different parts of the world. There will be sickness and health, full bellies and starvation, hatred and love, brotherhood and ethnic bitterness, war and peace, justice and oppression, violence and kindness, freedom and servitude, misery and contentment. But it will be a world in which such a thing as freedom will at least be *possible*, even though everyone might not have it.

If this were all that were involved, one might reasonably argue that it would be better to maintain the existing system rather than encourage it to collapse. If the collapse is rapid—as I think it probably will have to be—there is bound to be bloodshed, starvation, and death for many people. Though our society is a generally unhappy one, most people are not sufficiently dissatisfied to want to undergo great risks and hardships in order to achieve an outcome that will by no means be universally idyllic.

But there is much more at stake than the relative advantages of a collapse versus the *currently existing* conditions of life. We also have to ask where so-called “progress” will take us in the future. What kinds of monstrous crimes will be committed with the godlike powers of the new technology? Will human behavior be so regulated through biological and psychological techniques that the concept of freedom becomes meaningless? Will there be environmental disasters, even disasters that will make the world uninhabitable? Will we be replaced by machines or by bioengineered freaks? The future is impossible to predict. But two things are certain:

First, all of the deepest human values, and the qualities that have been most respected and admired since prehistoric times, will become meaningless or obsolete in the techno-world of the future. What is the meaning of personal identity if you are someone else's clone? What is the meaning of achievement if your innate abilities have been planned for you by biotechnicians? What is the meaning of free will if your behavior can be

predicted and guided by psychologists, or explained in mechanistic terms by neurophysiologists? Without free will, what is the meaning of freedom or of moral choice? What is the meaning of nature when wild organisms are allowed to survive only where and as the system chooses, and when they are altered by genes introduced, accidentally or intentionally, by human beings?

Already we can see that the prevailing concepts of traditional values like loyalty, friendship, honesty, and morality have been seriously altered under modern conditions. Courage has been devalued, personal honor has practically disappeared. In the future, with intelligent machines, human manipulation of other humans' genetic endowment, and the fact of living in a wholly artificial environment, conditions of life will be so radically different, so far outside the range of anything that the human race has experienced in the past, that all traditional values will become irrelevant and will die. The human race itself will be transformed into something entirely different from what it has been in the past.

Second, whatever may happen with technology in the future, it will *not* be rationally planned. Technology will *not* be used "wisely." In view of our society's past record, anyone who thinks that technology will be used wisely is completely out of touch with reality. Technology will take us on a course that we can neither predict nor control. All of history, as well as understanding of complex systems in general, supports this conclusion. No society can plan and control its own development.

The changes that technology will bring will be a hundred times more radical, and more unpredictable, than any that have occurred in the past. The technological adventure is wildly reckless and utterly mad, and the people who are responsible for it are the worst criminals who have ever lived. They are worse than Hitler, worse than Stalin. Neither Stalin nor Hitler ever dreamed of anything so horrible.

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Who says I love to read and write? Of course, when you're stuck in prison you have to have some sort of entertainment, and reading and writing are better than watching television (which I do not do). But when you're living out in the mountains you don't *need* entertainment. During my best time in the mountains I did very little reading, and what writing I did was mostly

in my diary and was not for pleasure but for the purpose of recording my experiences so that I would never lose the memory of them.

Later, beginning roughly around 1980, I did embark on a program of reading. But that was purposeful reading, mostly in the social sciences. My goal was to understand more about human nature and about history, especially about the way societies develop and change.

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I've never had anything but contempt for the so-called "60s kids," the radicals of the Vietnam-War era. (The Black Panthers and other black activists are possible exceptions, since black people had then, and still have today, more genuine grievances on the score of discrimination than anyone else does.) I was a supporter of the Vietnam War. I've changed my mind about that, but not for the reasons you might expect.

I knew all along that our political and military leaders were fighting the war for despicable reasons—for their own political advantage and for the so-called "national interest." I supported the war because I thought it was necessary to stop the spread of communism, which I believed was even more dangerous to freedom, and even more committed to technology, than the system we have in this country is.

I've changed my mind about the war because I've concluded that I vastly overestimated the danger of communism. I overestimated its danger partly as a result of my own naivety and partly because I was influenced by media propaganda. (At the time, I was under the mistaken impression that most journalists were reasonably honest and conscientious.)

As it turned out, communism broke down because of its own inefficiency, hence no war was needed to prevent its spread. Despite its ideological commitment to technology, communism showed itself to be less effective than capitalism in bringing about technological progress. Finally—again because of its own inefficiency—communism was far less successful than it would have liked to be in strangling individual freedom. Thirty years ago I accepted the image of communist countries that the media projected. I believed that they were tightly regulated societies in which virtually the individual's every move was supervised by the Party or the State. Undoubtedly this was the way the communist leaders would have *liked* to run their countries. But it now seems that because of corruption and

inefficiency in communist systems the average man in those countries had a great deal more wiggle-room than was commonly assumed in the West. Very instructive is Robert W. Thurston's study, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941* (Yale University Press, 1996).

On the basis of Thurston's information, one could plausibly argue that the average Russian worker under Stalin actually had more personal freedom than the average American worker has had at most times during the 20th century. This certainly was not because the communist leaders *wanted* the workers to have any freedom, but because there wasn't much they could do to prevent it.

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You write that you "could go on-line and learn all about" me. Yes, and to judge from the Internet postings that people have sent me, probably most of what you learned was nonsense. Leaving aside the question of the accuracy of the information you get from the Internet and assuming for the sake of argument that the Internet is a wholly beneficial source of information, still it weighs very little when balanced against the negative aspects of technology.

ENDNOTES

[1] Carleton S. Coon, *The Hunting Peoples*, Little, Brown And Company, Boston, 1971, pages 372-73.

[2] *The Forest People*, and *Wayward Servants*.

[3] John D. Hunter, *Manners and Customs of Several Indian Tribes Located West of the Mississippi*, Ross and Haines, Minneapolis, 1957, pages 52, 319-320. The authenticity of Hunter's account has been questioned, but has been persuasively defended by Richard K. Drinnon, *White Savage: The Case of John Dunn Hunter*, Schocken Books, 1972. There are in any event plenty of other sources that refer to the freedom of primitive and barbarian peoples, e.g., E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, Oxford University Press, 1972, pages 5-6, 181-83.

[4] Here I'm relying on my memory of something I read many years ago. I can't cite the source, and my memory is not infallible.

[5] "Only with difficulty could [Mbuti] mothers remember the number of their deceased children." Paul Schebesta, *Die Bambuti-Pygmäen vom Ituri*, I. Band, Institut Royal Colonial Belge, Brussels, 1938, page 112. This suggests that the loss of a child was less than a devastating experience for Mbuti women.

[6] *Mean* was an obscure magazine (now no longer published) for which J. N. was a writer.

[7] I think W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, in the one-volume, abridged edition of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, make this point in regard to the paterfamilias of Polish peasant families, but I'm relying on memory and can't cite the page.

[8] It may have been commonplace for slaves and medieval peasants to escape their servitude by running away. See Richard C. Hoffmann, *Land, Liberties, and Lordship in a Late Medieval Countryside*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1989, pages 51-52; William H. TeBrake, *A Plague of Insurrection*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1993, page 8; Andreas Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1988, pages 90, 158; *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th edition, 2003, Volume 18, article "European History and Culture," pages 618, 629; Volume 20, article "Germany," pages 75-76, 81; Volume 27, article "Slavery," pages 298-99.

[9] For these forms of resistance by slaves and serfs generally (not just Russian ones), see, e.g., Wayne S. Vucinich (editor), *The Peasant in Nineteenth Century Russia*, Stanford, California, 1968; Hoffmann, op.cit., pages 144, 305, 356, 358; TeBrake, op.cit., pages 8-9; Dorpalen, op.cit., pages 90, 92, 123, 129, 158-59; Geir Kjetsaa, *Fyodor Dostoyevsky: A Writer's Life*, translated by Siri Hustvedt and David McDuff, Fawcett Columbine, New York, 1989, pages 32, 33; Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1978, page 41; *Encycl. Brit.*, 2003, Volume 27, article "Slavery," pages 298-99. Landlords or slave-owners who abused peasant or slave women sexually may have run a grave risk of being killed by the women themselves or by their menfolk. See *Ibid.*, page 299. My recollection is that sexual abuse of their women was the most common reason for which Russian peasants killed their landlords, according to Mosse, *Alexander II and the Modernization of Russia*. (Since I'm relying on memory, I can't give the page number or the author's full name.) Some time around the end of the 19th century an adolescent Mexican peon named Doroteo Arango killed one of the owners of the estate where he worked, in revenge for an assault on his sister. He fled to the mountains, where he lived for some years as a fugitive. Subsequently he acquired a certain notoriety as a revolutionary under the nom de guerre of Pancho Villa. *Encycl. Brit.*, 2003, Volume 12, article "Villa, Pancho," page 369.